

Heart disease strikes women, too

You can protect yourself against this number one killer of women in the U.S.

Read an excerpt from 'Strong Women, Strong Hearts'

Conventional wisdom says that more men are affected by heart disease than women. But this is wrong. Every year, more women die than men. However, with proper nutrition, exercise and lifestyle choices, women can help protect themselves against heart disease. The book "Strong Women, Strong Hearts," by Miriam E. Nelson, Alice Lichtenstein and Lawrence Lindner, gives readers practical advice on how to stop it before it starts, and medical options if heart disease does strike.

A Call to Action

I was first diagnosed with borderline high blood pressure in my twenties, when I was pregnant. I still had high blood pressure after I gave birth, but I was told only that I had to go on a strict diet even though I wasn't really overweight. I went like that for years, with my blood pressure getting higher and higher throughout my thirties. Not until I was in my forties and my blood pressure skyrocketed to 200 over 100 was I given medication to lower it.

—Linda

I woke up one morning with severe chest pain, severe upper back pain, nauseated, short of breath—an overall horrible feeling. It got worse and worse throughout the day. Finally, I went to the emergency room. The doctor said, "It's probably just a muscle ... I'm going to give you a muscle relaxant and send you home." But as much as I was rationalizing ("Did I play racquetball too hard? Could this be food poisoning?"), I had this sense of doom. I didn't want to leave until I had had further testing. "I want an EKG," I said. "I want a blood test." Reluctantly, they agreed. When they first attached me to the EKG machine, the nurse thought she had hooked me up wrong. She called in another nurse. Then they got the doctor. It took twenty minutes for them to finally believe I was having a heart attack.

—Cindy

I had to wait thirty minutes in the emergency room. They thought I had indigestion and sent me home with very strong pain medication. I was back in the emergency room late that night. They finally did an EKG—and immediately air-lifted me to a larger hospital for emergency heart surgery. I stopped breathing on the table.

—DeLinda

Heart disease kills more women than men

Unfortunately, what happened to these women is not unique. Heart disease is considered a man's problem, but every year since 1984, it has killed more women than men in the United States. A woman dies from heart disease about once every minute, for an annual total of about half a million deaths. There are also lots of women living with heart disease—some eight million.

It has clearly reached a crisis point, one that reflects an unfortunate irony. So much has been made of women's hearts as symbols—of love, purity of emotion, the center of a home. But the female heart can become diseased, and the very realness of the heart as giver of life is ignored.

Even if a woman is properly diagnosed, she is often not properly tended to:

- Whereas 25 percent of men die within one year of a first heart attack, the number surges to 38 percent for women.
- Eighteen percent of male heart attack survivors experience a second heart attack within six years, compared with 35 percent of women heart attack sufferers—almost twice the proportion.
- Women are almost two times as likely as men to die after bypass surgery, and half as likely to get an angioplasty to open a narrowed blood vessel.

Unfortunately, stubborn myths about women and heart disease stand in the way of effective treatment.

Myth: When it comes to women, it's more important to focus on breast cancer than heart disease.

Fact: Heart disease is the leading killer of women in the United States, taking many times more lives than breast cancer. Breast cancer is a devastating disease, but you can't deny the numbers. Heart disease kills 499,000 women each year (compared with 432,000 men). Breast cancer kills 40,000 women each year.

Myth: It's men who need to be the focus of lifestyle changes for preventing heart disease.

Fact: Women need to protect themselves by living heart-healthfully, too—but often don't. In a University of Nebraska Medical Center study that looked at almost 200 couples in which the man had had a heart attack or bypass surgery, it was found that in one in three households, both husbands and wives were overweight, and they ate similar amounts of fat and salt. There were also similarities in their exercise levels as well as in their smoking histories. Indeed, women were twice as likely as their husbands to continue smoking eight weeks after their spouse's heart attack or heart surgery. Many of the women did not even know their own blood cholesterol levels, which, as we will explain, is an essential piece of knowledge for each of us.

Myth: A low-fat diet is the best thing for your heart.

Fact: The advice from the scientific community is no longer to keep dietary fat as low as possible. In fact, for some people, very low-fat diets can actually contribute to heart disease. The goal now is to keep only certain types of fat as low as possible. The limit for fats in general has been liberalized. Even up to 35 percent of calories from fat is now considered acceptable (as long as it doesn't contribute to weight gain).

Myth: If you've been diagnosed with heart disease, you should not exercise.

Fact: If you've been diagnosed with heart disease, it is more important than ever to exercise. Gone are the weeks of bed rest for heart attack patients. Most are

now encouraged to start moving their bodies again as soon as possible, even before they leave the hospital. Those with heart-related risk factors, such as high cholesterol, should be challenging their hearts to work harder with exercise, too.

Myth: Heart disease is an inevitable consequence of aging.

Fact: No, it's not. Yes, growing older puts you at higher heart disease risk. But risk is just that: risk. It's not a foregone conclusion, even for those with a family history of heart disease. There's much you can do in your everyday life to thwart "fate."

Excerpted from "Strong Women, Strong Hearts," by Miriam E. Nelson, Alice Lichtenstein, Lawrence Lindner. Copyright © 2005. Published by the Penguin Group. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt can be used without permission of the publisher.